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ABSTRACT

Women who seek further education and the formal credentials it provides often have acquired valuable knowledge and work experience while performing various unpaid work in their homes and communities. Awarding college credit and recognition for women's nonpaid work is a measure of social justice and equity. The three major ways to evaluate and credit prior learning are tests, credit recommendation for courses offered by business or community groups, and individualized assessment. Each method has its advantages and disadvantages; however, the portfolio method, which was developed for assessment of prior incidental learning, offers the greatest flexibility. Integration of practical work into college studies can be traced to the end of the 19th century; however, as late as the mid-1970s, assessment of prior learning focused on learning from paid work experience. In 1984, work began in the United States to identify the academically accreditable skills and knowledge that women acquire from their unpaid work experience as homemakers and volunteers. Several studies and projects to develop models for such accreditation have been implemented in both Canada and the United States. Similar efforts have been undertaken in Europe and in the Pacific as well. Twenty-five references conclude the paper. (MN)

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AWARDING EDUCATIONAL CREDIT FOR WOMEN'S UNPAID WORK

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this session is to describe the rationale and process for awarding educational credit for adult women's prior experience learning and to explain how this process empowers women who have centered their lives around their home, family, and community. The rationale behind the process of awarding academic credit for prior experience learning is that adults, who seek further education and the formal credentials it provides, often have learned and are able to do what is being taught. Adult students seek recognition of this learning from the educational system. They do not want to spend time and money being taught something they already know. Adult women, in particular, face problems about the recognition of their prior learning. Stereotypes of women's unpaid work in the home and the community have often depicted this work as requiring little skill and having little relevance for education and employment. This paper will include:

1. An explanation of what we mean by experiential learning.
2. The rationale for providing recognition of experiential learning.
3. Ways of evaluating and accrediting experience learning.
4. The special problems in accrediting women's prior experience learning.
5. A brief history of how women's prior experience learning has been evaluated and accredited in the United States.
6. Examples of how women's experiential learning is now being recognized in Canada.

1. AN EXPLANATION OF WHAT WE MEAN BY EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Experiential learning has been defined as "learning in which the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied. It is contrasted with learning in which the learner only reads about, hears about, talks about, or writes about these realities but never comes in contact with them as part of the learning process" (Keeton & Tate, 1978). Thus experiential learning usually occurs outside of the classroom although as Stanley (1980) has pointed out, "the classroom also provides experiential settings." Regardless of where learning occurs, it is considered experiential if the person has learned by carrying out actions in a work, leisure or family setting; seeing the effects of those actions, arriving at an understanding of a general principle; and applying this principle in new circumstances (Coleman, 1976).

The two major forms of experiential learning are:

- Sponsored experiential learning such as field work and internships, which takes place away from the classroom but is planned and/or supervised by a faculty member; and,

- Prior experiential learning, which includes both intention learning, such as self-directed study or non-credit courses, and incidental learning, from paid or unpaid work as well as other life experiences (Ekstrom, 1983).

When adults enter or return to college, they often discover that they know some of the things that are relevant for their educational goals or that would enable them to meet institutional requirements. They may then seek recognition of their prior experience learning. Recognizing experiential learning means "giving official credit for knowledge which has been acquired through means other than formal courses of study" (Sansregret, 1983). Colleges considering the recognition of experiential learning must decide on a rationale and a method.

2. THE RATIONALE FOR PROVIDING RECOGNITION OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

The educational process in its traditional way does not answer the needs of the veteran, the housewife who wishes to return to school after several years at home, or the small business owner who wishes to obtain a college degree on a part-time basis (Avakian, 1979). "Providing working people with lateral entry into a collegiate program on the basis of documented noncollegiate learning is an eminently sensible idea," argue Green and Sullivan (1975), "for requirements that result in duplication of learning are unwise use of both human and educational resources."

"What we need to argue," says Seeman (1983) "is that credit should be awarded not to certain experiences, but to the ability to process experience and transfer cognitive and affective perceptions". Stressing

the difference between education and learning, he observes "There is a big difference between the student who just goes through an experience, and one who can look at it, process it, analyse it, put it into language and thereby 'own' it."

The increasing use and relevance of educational credentials in the work setting has brought about:

- the need to make the present system more comprehensive; and
- the desire of students to have their learning, whenever or however attained, incorporated into the credit and credentialing system in order to take advantage of subsequent educational opportunities without duplicating educational experiences and wasting personal resources (Miller and Mills, 1978).

The growing need for competence says Hatala (1979) obligates universities and colleges to revise their policies on learning acquired outside the institutions. Doing this, as Stanley (1980) has pointed out, would be an asset to these institutions since higher enrollment from an adult population would increase tuition income. In addition, as Sansregret (1983) notes, the idea of recognizing experiential learning translates into a concern for social justice and fairness to all.

Consequently, it has been argued (Davis and Knapp, 1978) that:

- College level learning should be recognized regardless of where it took place.
- Adults should not be required to take courses meant to bring about learning they have already acquired.
- Non-traditional educational options and programs serve the diverse needs of students.

3. WAYS OF EVALUATING AND ACCREDITING PRIOR EXPERIENCE LEARNING

The assessment of prior experience learning may require techniques that are not used in assessing traditional learning as well as familiar methods. It is necessary to identify learning experiences, to map the breadth and depth of the learning that occured, to relate this learning to educational standards or occupational requirements, and to demonstrate the quality of this learning in relationship to these standards (Ektrom, 1983).

The three major ways to evaluate and credit prior learning are:

- Tests, including both standardized tests specifically designed for the assessment of prior learning and faculty-made (nonstandardized) tests;

- Credit recommendation for courses offered by business, industry community groups and voluntary organizations.

- Individualized assessment, using portfolio assessment, interviews, demonstration or other techniques that enable an individual to show what he has learned and is able to do.

Each method has its advantages and disadvantages. Tests, which are the most widely used form of assessment for prior learning, seem best suited for assessing intentional learning, such as self-directed study. Standardized tests provide a means of comparing students. Credit recommendations provide a quick and easy way of recognizing the learning in non-credit courses; however, it is the course not the learner that is evaluated. The portfolio method, which was developed for assessment of prior incidental learning, offers the greatest flexibility.

A variety of materials are available to help colleges assess prior experience learning. The Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning (CAEL) has the most extensive group of publications in this field. These include materials by Willingham (1977) on how to prepare a portfolio and materials by Knapp (1977) on helping the returning student. A "typical institutional process" for assessing prior learning is described in Stanley (1980), and Sansregret (1983) presents a synthesis of different models, practices and assessment tools which are, or soon will be, in use.

4. THE SPECIAL PROBLEMS IN ACCREDITING WOMEN'S PRIOR EXPERIENCE LEARNING

When accrediting women's prior experiential learning, special problems arose due to the fact that academic institutions and the business world had no means to help women make an easy transition from family life to professional life.

Eliason (1977) mentions that:

- Women are tracked into programs leading to "dull, dead-end, and poorly paying" jobs.

- Vocational education needs help in attracting and keeping women in non-traditional occupational curricula.

- Vocational education programs rarely provide credit for life experience learning.

When a woman wishes to return to school she faces the barrier of age as well as sex stereotypes and the wide-spread beliefs that housework and volunteer work have little value, offer few learning opportunities that can be translated into courses and jobs.

Ekstrom (1981a, b) identifies six obstacles to the recognition of women's unpaid work when returning to school:

1) Identification: the woman herself, or the educator, may not recognize that an activity has been a learning experience in which new skills and knowledge are acquired.

2) Articulation: women and educators may not be able to see the relationship between skills acquired through experiential learning and those taught in a vocational education program.

3) Assessment: even when educators agree that women's life experience learning has resulted in relevant skills, formal recognition of these skills may not occur because of problems in assessing and credentialing life experience learning.

4) Knowledge gaps: because prior experience learning is not systematically organized, the knowledge a woman acquires may not cover all the topics taught in an educational program.

5) Financial and political: some education institutions do not give credit for life experience learning because they are concerned about the loss of tuition income or because government financial reimbursement policies do not provide for such payments.

6) Beliefs: some educators have stereotyped beliefs about women and the value of women's unpaid work. They also worry that if they accept life experience learning, it will result in lower standards or the admission of individuals unable to perform well in the program.

It is also considered that a lack of information becomes a major barrier when counseling and implementing programs for women.

5. A BRIEF HISTORY OF HOW WOMEN'S PRIOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING HAS BEEN EVALUATED AND ACCREDITED IN THE UNITED STATES

Integration of practical work into college studies can be traced to the end of the 19th century according to Houle (1976). Recognition of work experience became an important issue at the end of World War II when large numbers of servicemen wished to obtain some form of credit for the skills they had acquired in the Armed Services. One of the earliest programs that mentions the recognition of experiential learning

for adults was in 1953 in the School of General Studies at Brooklyn College (Stanley 1980). By the 1970's there were radical changes in student clientele with the population made up of different age and ethnic groups. Institutions responded to this by developing curricular models and methods better suited to their new clientele. The Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning began in 1974 as a way of helping colleges share information about these new educational approaches.

One problem with the assessment of prior learning, as it was being implemented in the U.S. in the mid-1970's was that the focus was on learning from paid work experience. This focus had the effect of excluding many women from assessment of prior learning. The problem was compounded by the fact that, during the 1970's, adult women entering or returning to college after a period of homemaking were the most rapidly increasing group of students in U.S. higher education.

In 1974, with support from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, work was begun on a project to identify the academically accreditable skills and knowledge that women acquire from their unpaid work experience as homemakers and as volunteers. Working with the Council of National Organizations for Adult Education, Ekstrom and her colleagues developed the "I Can" lists for the identification of women's unpaid work competencies. They also developed a workbook to aid women returning to college and seeking credit for their prior learning (Ekstrom, Harris and Lockheed, 1977) and a twelve-step process for colleges to use in accrediting women's volunteer work and homemaking experience (Ekstrom, 1980).

Subsequent funding from the Women's Educational Equity Act Program and from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Education and Employment, led to additional projects designed to help women use their experiential learning to obtain advanced standing in vocational education (Ekstrom, 1981a), or to enter the labor force (Ekstrom, 1981b; Ekstrom, 1981c). Neely and Schuley (1980) have developed and validated materials to help women who aspire to administrative jobs in education prepare portfolios that will demonstrate the management skills they developed in volunteer/unpaid jobs.

6. EXAMPLES OF HOW WOMEN'S EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IS NOW BEING RECOGNIZED IN CANADA AND ELSEWHERE

In Canada, the idea of recognizing women's experiential learning is growing fast. Various methods and studies are on the way, Zimmerman, L., Trew, M. (1979) in British Columbia; Reddin (1975) in New Brunswick, and Sansregret (1983) in Québec.

In Quebec, this recognition has been recommended by a national commission on adult education (The Jean Commission, 198-) and is strongly supported by the Quebec Ministry of Education. As a matter of fact,

this Ministry has placed this new philosophy in adult education among its top priorities. Budgets are allocated to a few researchers who are working thoroughly at the preparation of evaluating and credentialing women's experiential learning. The Quebec Ministry of Education has funded "The Recognition of Women's Experiential Learning in the United States" and a project to evaluate assistant nurses work in order to get an official nursing license after following the proper courses (St-Félicien College). Recognition of women's administrative skills is also on the way ("Fer de Lance", Sherbrooke, Québec). In the near future, throughout the province, colleges and universities as well as business and industry should be in a position to apply this concept. Quebec being among the most "avant-garde" province about the status of women is very receptive to this new philosophy. The President of the Canadian Council for the Status of Women, Lucie Pépin, spoke, in a television program, on Saturday Jan. 7, 1984 (Montréal T.V., Channel 10) about the necessity to recognize this contribution of women to society.

More than one hundred (100) groups of women were consulted about their experiential learning by means of a questionnaire sent by the "Office de la Coordination à la Condition féminine" of Québec. The "Conseil du Statut de la Femme" made several requests to the government and the "Transition-Travail" group (Job Re-entry for women) is eager to work on the implementation of programs relevant to this matter.

Professor Gabrielle Cantin, Department of Andragogy at University of Montreal, is presently directing two doctoral theses and she is also consultant for three research papers funded by the Quebec Ministry of Education on Experiential Learning. Lectures and papers focusing on women (Beaudet, Leclerc, 1982), on adults in general (Campeau, Brind'-Amour, 1983) are presented, and universities' and colleges' faculty members support and prepare students to this new approach as an "educational value" (Gaudet, 1981).

Other countries are preoccupied by this recognition of experiential learning. A delegation from France was sent to Quebec during the fall of 1983 to seek information on the various researches and methods already in place.

Venezuela, Korea, Philippines, England, Switzerland, etc. expressed a desire to receive information and learn how to recognize the value of non-paid work experience.

CONCLUSIONS

Awarding college credit and recognition for women's non-paid work is a measure of social justice and equity. It must be done scientifically by highly competent people who, when helping women make the proof of evidence of their competence, bring them to a recognition of their deepest values.

The processes which have been developed enable women to deal with life's changes. They help them to use education as a way of increasing their own power and control over their life. They also help them overcome the stereotypes of women's unpaid work that have served to limit women s opportunities.

March 7, 1984

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